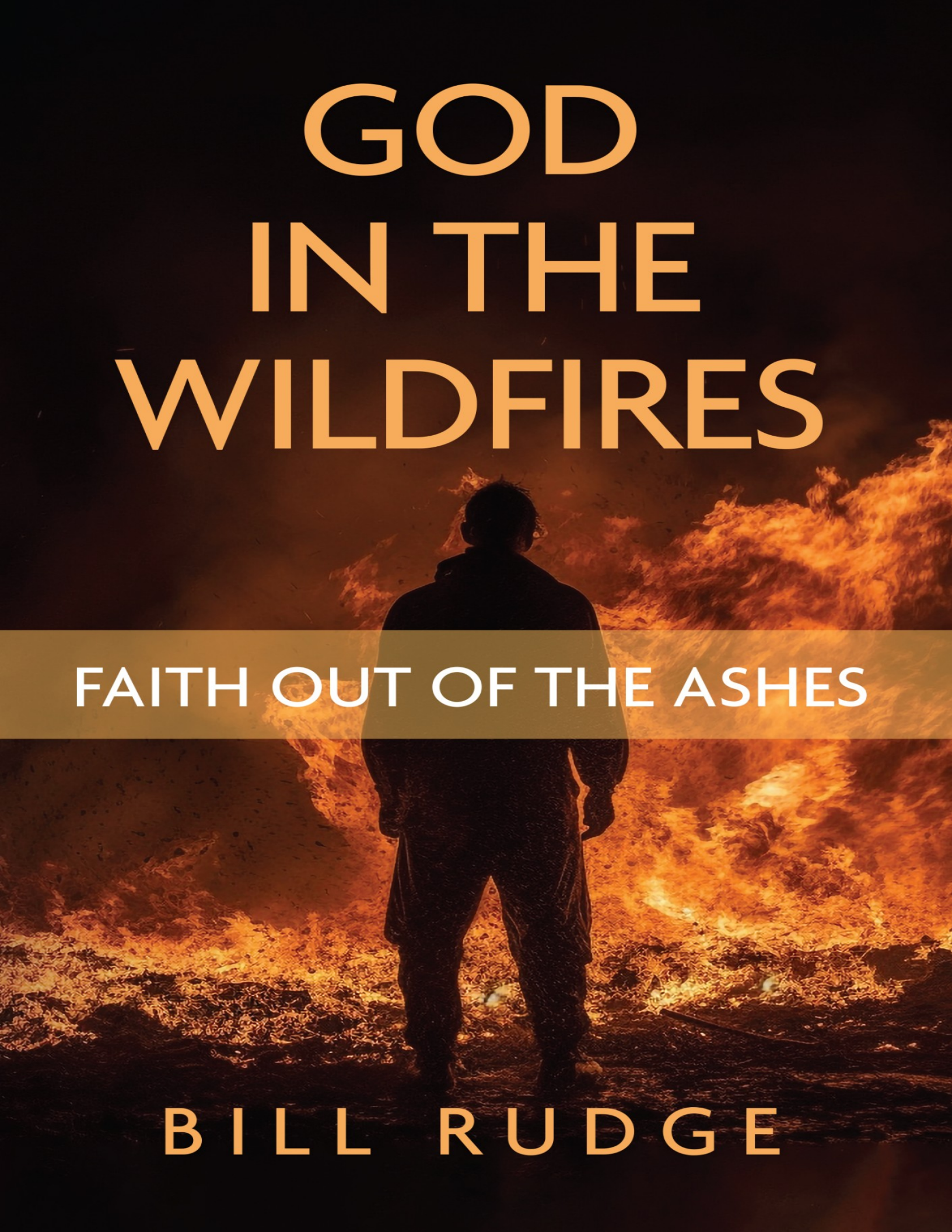
GOD IN THE WILDFIRES



FAITH OUT OF THE ASHES

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The “Great Escape”

The neighborhoods and landscape were devastated as if by an atomic blast! Mountains and canyons lay charred as far as the eye could see. Over 3,500 houses were destroyed—most reduced to rubble and ash—along with ranks of burned cars and trucks, their windshields blown out, crumbled safety glass fallen and melted into congealed clumps. Billows of smoke blackened the daytime sky. Black soot covered everything in sight, creating a lunar landscape as uncontrolled wildfires, exacerbated by Santa Ana winds, devastated an area equal in size to the state of Rhode Island.

Karen and I had just returned from ministering at U.S. Army and Air Force bases in Germany. We were in Southern California for further ministry when we found ourselves under a mandatory evacuation order due to California’s most devastating wildfire in history at that time. Shifting winds caused the raging flames to cut off many escape routes, and some people had already died trying to flee when the intense heat overtook them. Others lost their possessions in homes that had no insurance and now faced an uncertain future. We prayed that God would protect our daughter Tabitha’s home, which was in harm’s way.

In the midst of this chaos, our faithful God provided not only a way of escape, but also avenues for ministry. Over the next two weeks, I had opportunities to minister as a chaplain to hundreds of people at several disaster relief centers and burned homes.

Santa Ana Winds

It was a beautiful and peaceful evening on Saturday, October 25, 2003 at my daughter and son-in-law’s home in Alpine, California, about 30 miles east of San Diego. As it was the last weekend in October, we turned the clocks back one hour before retiring for the night. At approximately 3:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, I was

awakened by Tabitha who told me the Santa Ana winds (strong down-slope winds that blow through the mountain passes in Southern California) were blowing up to 70 mph. The outside furniture and toys were being carried away in these horrific winds.

For over six months, there had been no significant rainfall in Southern California which, coupled with the Santa Ana winds, created the perfect weather conditions for a wildfire.

A Glimpse of Revelation

That morning, I went outside the house and saw billows of smoke to the north, west and south. The sky became pitch black and the sun glowed red—almost apocalyptic. On a smaller scale, I caught a glimpse of what it will be like all over the world during the Tribulation.

My son-in-law, Clayton, a California Highway Patrolman (CHP), had been working the fire areas from Saturday night to Sunday morning. Clay was exhausted, and vomited three times due to smoke inhalation.

As the fires continued to burn closer to Tabitha's house, I stepped out onto the driveway several times and raised my hands to the Lord asking Him to spare this house because it was used for ministry purposes. Around 12:30 p.m. on Sunday, October 26, Clay decided to take his family to Rich and Sunday's house, their cousins in Mission Bay on San Diego's coast. Clay wanted to protect his family from any possible harm from the erratic behavior of the massive fire being so close to their home. I wanted to stay at the house, but Clayton insisted we follow in his car.

My son-in-law and daughter, with my two young grandchildren (three-year-old Caeleana and two-year-old Carson) led the way, heading to Interstate 8-West. Karen and I, along with their two dogs, Molly and Niki, followed in a 1995 Neon with a broken gas gauge.

A few miles into the trip, Clay and Tabitha pulled over to inform me they had left the gas on at the house. I said I would go back (in spite of Clayton's warning not to do so), but I wanted Karen to go

with them; however, she insisted on staying with me. At this point, the flames were burning within 100 feet from where we had stopped on the freeway.

Back at the house, I turned off the gas and closed all the windows that Tabitha had opened because of the high winds earlier. Meanwhile, Karen heard on the news that I-8 was now closed to the west and fires were burning all over San Diego county. We made the decision to stay at the house with the dogs. Twenty minutes later, I saw an orange glow and flames just over the hill from Tabitha's house. I stood on the driveway and again raised my hands to the Lord asking Him to spare this house.

Thirty minutes later, the sheriff drove through the neighborhood announcing a mandatory and immediate evacuation. I loaded Molly into the car but was unsuccessful in corralling Niki, a huge Siberian husky, after chasing him around for five minutes, so I prayed the Lord would somehow protect him. As we were leaving we were told by firefighters and neighbors not to expect the neighborhood to be standing when we returned.

The Detour

We were uncertain of where to go or how to get there since 8-West was closed and fires were burning all over San Diego county. The only place the fires were not yet burning was to the east, taking us farther from our daughter and her family. In one moment, it seemed Karen and I were safe, secure and comfortable; yet in the next moment, we were fleeing for our lives—without food, water or shelter.

Leaving Alpine, it took us one hour to go a mere quarter mile in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Clay told me via cell phone, to leave his car and RUN because the flames could quickly overtake us from the unpredictable winds that were gusting up to 70 mph. He said people had been incinerated while trying to escape in their cars. Since we were stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, he told me to take his gun from the trunk, strap it around my shoulder and abandon the car.

But we decided to stay with the car since it seemed our only hope to escape the approaching flames.

The sky was dark, ominous and filled with billows of smoke. Fleeing the approaching wildfires, traffic was often at a standstill. As we waited for the traffic to move, I told people we met that we were catching a glimpse of Revelation and that the biblical account is accurate regarding its description of destruction on earth during the Tribulation (Joel 2:30-31; Revelation 6:12; 8:7, 12).

Joel 2:30-31:

> I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

Revelation 6:12:

> I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood.

Revelation 8:6-7:

> And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them. The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

Revelation 8:12:

> The fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be darkened and the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way.

I had recently read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and had watched videos about Christian martyrs, such as John Huss and others, who

were burned at the stake or tortured with fire, giving me a vivid mental picture of what fire and smoke could do to humans.

Karen was crying and called BJ, Tabitha and other family members to say goodbye; however, I assured them I had total peace that the Lord would keep us safe and would protect Tabitha and Clay's house. As we looked back, Tabitha's house appeared to be in flames and smoke! We prayed several more times that God would spare the house.

Still caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic, hot ash was falling all around us and our eyes and lungs were burning from the smoke. Once again, I assured Clayton and BJ that we would be safe. Tabitha was very upset because she felt responsible for sending us back to her house. Unable to go west, we were heading east in hopes of reaching the home of Sue and Doug, friends of Tabitha who told her we could stay with them.

When we were finally out of Alpine and onto 8-East, we saw a woman, Susan, standing along the freeway near a motor home with a Corvette hitched to the back of it. She appeared to be distraught and was staring back at Alpine watching the fire. Karen and I stopped and stood with her. She had fled Alpine when the canyons around her house burst into flames; she was certain her brand new house had burned to the ground. Her husband had gone back to get their truck, which was loaded with personal items. I prayed with her that her husband and house would be safe, and, about a minute after we prayed, she was elated to see her husband drive up in the truck.

Sue and Doug, whose house we were hoping to reach, lived in Mount Laguna in Cleveland National Forest, about 25 miles east of Alpine. It was dark by the time we drove the last ten miles to their house in the mountains—on unfamiliar winding roads.

We faced several other challenges. Our cell phone battery was dying, but Karen tried one more time to call Sue for her address. As soon as Karen got it, the phone went dead! Despite the broken gas gauge, we knew the gas in the car was running low due to the mileage record Clayton kept. With electricity out (no street or house lights), it was pitch-black in the mountains. I stopped at a fire

station near Sue's house to call and ask her husband to stand at the end of their driveway with a flashlight so we could find them.

Sue and Doug were hosting another displaced couple and were using candles to light their house. In the course of the evening, Sue asked me how I came to faith, and we all talked together for over an hour as I shared my testimony.

Early the next morning, I felt led to drive back to Alpine. (The very next day, the one road in and out of the mountains which we had traveled to stay the night with Doug and Sue, was shut down due to fire.) I wanted to check on Tabitha's house, then make our way 30 miles west to Rich and Sunday's. I knew it would be difficult since so many roads were closed, and the thick smoke made day seem like night. At their insistence, we left Molly (my daughter's dog) at Doug and Sue's in case we had to walk to Alpine because of blocked roads or if we ran out of gas.

We wound our way down the 10 miles of mountain roads, then took U.S. Route 80 heading west; however, seven miles from Alpine, this highway was closed as well as 8-West. The only road left open sent us south toward the nearby Mexican border, I was concerned that, should the road take us into Mexico, having a gun in the trunk could mean life imprisonment there. Not knowing the road, we were relieved to finally see a sign indicating 16 miles to Alpine, so we continued on. Our car was the only vehicle on the road.

About four miles from Alpine, airborne ash and smoke were so thick I thought we might have to turn back. I expected our tires to melt at any moment from the hot ash that was raining down on us. I apologized to Karen for getting her into this if anything should happen, but I still felt the Lord would get us through. Unexpectedly, in the distance, I saw three pickup trucks and followed them right into Alpine! Later, we discovered that entire area was consumed by fire a few hours after we drove through.

Except for a few vehicles, Alpine was abandoned. It looked like a ghost town. As we drove down Tabitha's road, we prayed their house would still be standing, and, from a distance, we saw that it was! We rejoiced and thanked God. It was covered with ash, but untouched by the fire. Thank the Lord I had turned off the gas and closed all

the windows, or they would have sustained soot and smoke damage throughout the house. We were elated to see Kacy, Tabitha's friend and one of our volunteer staff, pull up to Tabitha's house with her daughter, Sawyer. They had slept in their Alpine house last night since her husband, Terry, could not get home due to the closure of I-8. Niki, Tabitha's dog that was left behind, had taken refuge in a storm drainage pipe and was unharmed.

Because the air was still thick with smoke and ash, we could not stay in Alpine. We got on I-8 going west and met Clay at the CHP office in El Cajon to switch vehicles and give him his gun and belongings. When we arrived, Clayton hugged me three times.

Driving on 8-West toward Rich and Sunday's, helicopters were flying low overhead and dropping water on burning fires along the highway. Smoke was very thick all the way for the 30 miles from Alpine west to San Diego and the hazardous air quality lasted for days.

We arrived at Rich and Sunday's who were hosting thirteen people, including two pregnant women, three toddlers, two cats and two dogs. At that time, their home only had three bedrooms and one bath.

Full Circle

Throughout my experience with the California wildfires, there were many factors that dictated the outcome of the story. Looking back, I can clearly see God's protection, and how He orchestrated events in my life to come full circle.

Originally, I was scheduled to fly back to Pennsylvania on Monday (October 27, 2003), but my flight was cancelled. Because of the cancelation, the next day I took a one-hour Red Cross training class for volunteers, followed by a one-hour chaplain training session.

The people of California and the Red Cross workers were amazed that I was serving as chaplain to other fire victims since I was from Pennsylvania and a refugee of the fire. Truly, the Lord orchestrated this ministry opportunity. Some of the people affected by the

California wildfires had, a few years earlier, come east to help at the 9/11 terrorist site. Now, I was able to return the favor.

On Wednesday, I took eight hours of Red Cross Mass Care Training. Kc Hutter, owner of Dirt Cheap Car Rental, gave me free usage of a yellow convertible Mustang. I wanted something more conservative, but she insisted I borrow this vehicle.

On Thursday, we moved back into Tabitha's house. There was no telephone service or electricity, so there was no way to charge the cell phone. We had to throw out all the food in the refrigerator.

That same day, Karen and I went down Stagecoach Road to see Susan (the woman we had met on 8-East when the canyons around her house were burning). She was overjoyed to see us, and we were overjoyed to see that her beautiful new house was still standing. The fire came within 20 feet of her house, surrounding it on three sides, but the house remained untouched. I gave her a copy of my book, *Faith Through the Fire*, and a pamphlet copy of my testimony which she enthusiastically received.

Miracle on a Highway

This chapter was written by Rich Miller, Bill Rudge's nephew and former webmaster for Bill Rudge Ministries, as he recounts his incredible experience during the 2003 Alpine fires.

A situation happened on Halloween night 2003 in southern California that dramatically touched my family, strengthened our faith and demonstrated the amazing mercy and love that God has for us. My sister-in-law, Lynn Renzema, eagerly awaited the arrival of her husband, Todd, from work. Todd last called her on Route 52 (about 10 miles from their home in Santee, California) around 6:30 p.m. on Friday. It was 7:30 p.m. and Todd was an hour late. She sensed that something might be wrong and asked her mother, Diana, to come to their home. Lynn repeatedly tried to contact Todd on his cell phone without response.

Assuming that his car had broken down, Lynn prepared to search for him along the side of the freeway. A half-hour search yielded no clues to Todd's whereabouts, so Lynn returned home hoping to find his car parked in the driveway. She grew increasingly worried when she arrived home and learned that her mother still had not heard from Todd.

Soon I received a phone call from Lynn's mother, Diana. As she explained the situation, I thought there must be a logical explanation for Todd's late arrival since it was uncharacteristic of him to be an hour late and not call home.

My friend, Casey, and I drove by Todd's workplace. Upon discovering that he was not there, we decided to start looking for him along the freeway en route to Lynn and Todd's house. We were confronted with an eight-mile stretch of unlighted highway that consists of many deep ravines and large hills.

A few days before, one of the California fires had burned through this location consuming almost all of the brush and blackening much

of the area. The scorched earth made it even more difficult to see in the darkness. As we unsuccessfully searched the freeway, our imaginations began to paint a picture of likely scenarios, such as Todd driving off the freeway into a ravine, being a victim of a carjacking or being kidnapped.

Still No Clues

It was 9:15 p.m. when we arrived at Todd and Lynn's house. It was almost three hours since anyone had heard from him, so we decided to contact the local law enforcement agencies to determine if they had any information about him. The sheriff's department and the California Highway Patrol were contacted, but they reported having no record of Todd being involved in an accident, being transferred to a hospital or being taken to jail. We did learn that there had been an accident—a car fire earlier in the evening—but none of the vehicles or persons matched his description.

As time passed, we could not help but imagine the worst-case scenario—that Todd was severely injured or perhaps dead. We prayed for Todd's safety and that if he was hurt, the Lord would protect him. As we closed in prayer, Lynn mentioned that the Lord spoke to her heart that Todd was not dead but that he was just sleeping. Encouraged by Lynn's revelation, Casey and I decided to search the freeway one more time, but the dark of night made an effective search impossible.

Casey and I arrived home around 11:30 p.m.—nearly five hours after Todd went missing. With each passing moment we grew increasingly concerned about his safety and again prayed for God's protection. We realized we had done everything possible and placed the situation entirely in God's hands. As the early morning hours approached, we tried to get some sleep to resume our search at sunrise.

Eleven Hours Later

My wife, Sunday, and I woke at 5:45 a.m. to the ringing of the telephone. As my wife struggled to find the receiver, I anxiously waited to hear if this might be news regarding Todd. My friend, Clayton Smith, a California Highway Patrol officer, had just started his morning shift and was on the phone. He was contacted by Lynn earlier that morning and was informed of Todd's disappearance. Clayton had already notified dispatch which made this a top priority because of Clayton's friendship with Todd. A helicopter unit was contacted to search the canyon areas along the freeway, but an overnight rain and a heavy morning fog delayed the helicopter.

Clayton drove his patrol car slowly along the shoulder of the freeway while I peered into the ravines along the way. As I peered into each canyon, I prepared myself mentally for the possibility of seeing Todd's car at the bottom.

New Clues

With every moment that passed, our hope of finding Todd alive became more desperate. Clayton contacted dispatch once again and learned further details about an accident that had occurred the previous night on the freeway. He learned that at approximately 6:30 p.m. emergency vehicles responded to an accident involving two cars and a fire. A female driver was reportedly removed from the scene and taken to the emergency room. One car was a Pontiac Grand Am and the other car was unidentifiable due to the damage it had sustained but was suspected to be a Pontiac.

Clayton pulled me aside and mentioned that a car fitting Todd's description was hit on Route 52 last night, completely destroyed by fire, with no report of the driver. We concluded there was a high possibility that one of these vehicles could have been Todd's. Just then, my uncle, Bill Rudge, and Lynn drove up to help with the search. We decided not to tell Lynn until we were certain if Todd was involved.

As Bill stepped out of his car and out of Lynn's presence, Clayton informed Bill of the situation. After a brief discussion, Clayton and I sped away in the patrol car to find the accident scene while Bill took Lynn home to pray and contact hospitals.

Locating the Accident Scene

After several minutes, we noticed skid marks along the shoulder of the freeway, about a half mile west of where we had originally been searching. Clayton slowed down and stopped the patrol car on the shoulder near some debris. As Clayton talked with dispatch, I got out of the patrol car and walked to the edge of the ravine. I looked down and saw Todd lying face up on the ground about 20 feet down the hillside. Had the heavy brush (chaparral) not burned off in the fires, we would have never seen him. His car was nowhere to be found. His back was flat against the earth, his face as pale as snow, left arm by his side, with his right hand resting on his chest. As I struggled to grasp the reality of the situation, a surge of adrenaline shot through my body as though I was hit in the chest by a heavy object. I turned my head away stricken with the fact that I had just found my brother-in-law dead in a canyon. My knees began to buckle as I yelled to Clayton, "There's a body down there!"

As I observed Todd slightly wiggling the fingers on his right hand, I recalled Lynn's words about God telling her Todd was not dead but was just sleeping. I turned toward Clayton who was informing dispatch and yelled, "He's alive!"

In an effort for a more immediate response, Clayton radioed in the code for "officer needs assistance." As I raced to get the EMT kit out of the patrol car, Clayton made his way down the ravine to check Todd's vital signs and offer him aid.

Hold On!

Todd lay almost motionless as Clayton applied gauze to a noticeable laceration on the side of his head. I placed my fingers in the palm of Todd's right hand to let him know that I was there. Todd

briefly opened and rolled his eyes side to side as I continued to reassure him that help was on the way. His breathing was labored and shallow, rattling as he fought for air. Clayton started to connect the O_2 bottle as he administered oxygen to aid Todd's breathing. In order to maintain Todd's alertness, I commanded him to grip my fingers whenever I felt him loosen his grip.

Within a few minutes, the first of the medical response teams arrived. Clayton called to them, "He's been here all night!" Immediately, the EMTs grabbed their gear and rushed to Todd. Several more emergency personnel arrived including fire trucks, highway patrol officers, ambulances and a helicopter unit. It was not long before Todd was placed on a transfer board and carried up the ravine toward a waiting ambulance.

As I walked out of the canyon toward the patrol car, I overheard one of the emergency personnel tell Clayton that they could not find Todd's pulse, indicating his system was starting to shut down. As Todd was rushed into the ambulance and to the emergency room, Clayton and I followed behind in the patrol car. I prayed silently for Todd's survival and hoped that he could hang on long enough to make it to the emergency room.

Assessing His Injuries

Within minutes, we arrived at the hospital. We were told that Todd had survived the trip to the emergency room, but his body temperature was down to 85 degrees. He was quickly taken into the trauma unit for a CT scan in order to assess the extent of his head trauma. As family members started to arrive at the hospital, doctors reported, after several tests, that he had the following extensive injuries:

- Brain trauma, swelling, slight bleeding, with the possibility of cognitive and communication damage such as delayed comprehension
- Left ankle fracture and laceration
- Shattered left knee

- Left shoulder fracture and dislocation possibly requiring a steel rod and ball insertion
- Right shoulder fracture
- Right knee hairline fracture
- Multiple skin abrasions and lacerations
- Several chipped teeth

In speaking with the medical personnel who assessed Todd's injuries, it was speculated that:

- On his way home from work, he was stuck in traffic on the freeway. For an unknown reason, Todd pulled onto the shoulder and got out of the car.
- As he was standing near his car, it was struck from behind by a motorist who had swung onto the shoulder. The impact forced his car to smash against him clipping his legs and knees. As the car moved forward, it violently threw him into the ravine.
- His car finally rested on the shoulder 50 feet away from its original location and ignited when the gas tank ruptured.
- When emergency personnel arrived at the scene and found no body in or around the wreckage of Todd's vehicle, they assumed the vehicle was previously disabled and abandoned prior to the accident.
- Due to the extreme damage to Todd's car, authorities were unable to find the license plate or vehicle identification number and therefore no records of his car were in their computer systems.

Miraculous Recovery

Bill visited Todd at the Surgical Intensive Care Unit at the hospital before and after assignments with the Red Cross. After an extensive hospitalization of approximately three months, Todd made a miraculous recovery and returned home to his family.

It was miraculous....

- that he was not killed on impact
- that he survived being thrown 50 feet
- that he did not suffer permanent brain damage.

At that time, as he held his two-year-old son and anticipated the birth of another child, we were all so thankful that God had spared Todd's life.

Our families continue to believe that a miracle happened and many prayers were answered by these remarkable chain of events. My wife, Sunday, wrote to Bill and Karen, "It meant so much to all of us to have your prayers and actual support during the search for an early recovery of Todd." Just as God had revealed earlier to Lynn that Todd was not dead, he was just sleeping—Todd had been found alive, minutes from death! He had lain 14 hours in a ravine, with multiple injuries, through the cold of night, and an overnight rain. Yes, God protected him, and answered our prayers. What a truly amazing God we have!

Out of the Ashes

In the days following our escape from the devastating Southern California fires, I served as a chaplain at several Red Cross evacuation centers and the sites of burned homes. To maximize spiritual care to the many hurting people with physical, emotional and spiritual needs, I gave many of my books and audio messages to the fire victims, and to others as requested. These materials were gladly received. Hundreds of exciting ministry opportunities came about as a result. Following are a few excerpts from my journal.

Scripps Ranch, Friday October 31, 2003

- A very affluent area and one of those most devastated by the fires. As a chaplain I ministered to fire victims and supported workers from various agencies who were helping the fire victims.
- Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, showed up for a major media event. I was given the opportunity to share with the liaison for the mayor of San Diego and then a security agent for Tom Ridge approached me. Tom's security agent wanted to set up a personal meeting for me with Tom (since we were both from Pennsylvania) but was unable to do so because of time constraints.
- A couple days later, I came back to visit the devastated area and encourage some of the residents who were, by this time, back on their property cleaning up the debris.

Harbison Canyon, Sunday, November 2, 2003

- A community where over 300 of the 496 homes were completely destroyed. From 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. I listened

to their stories; provided food, water and clothes; prayed with, counseled and encouraged over 100 people. All of them were deeply appreciative, and I was greatly blessed by their attitudes.

- Mark, a pastor, lost both his home and his church, but enthusiastically proclaimed the Lord's faithfulness. (Two weeks later I attended church services in a tent in Harbison Canyon conducted by Mark. What a dedicated man of God.)
- A woman, living on the street for the past year after a divorce, had her belongings stored at a friend's house which was destroyed by the fire. I convinced her to apply for financial assistance, and to volunteer at the evacuation center for the rest of the day. Through service to others, she became more positive and hopeful.
- An older man who lived alone lost his house in the fire. With tears in his eyes and in broken English, he told me he had absolutely nowhere to stay. An hour later, he came over with a huge smile and repeatedly thanked me because he was given help with lodging and finances. (When I returned a few days later, this older man from Holland was so excited to see me that he cried. I gave him my book *Reaching Your Maximum Potential in Christ*.)
- President Bush drove through Harbison Canyon and talked to many of the victims. I missed him by a few hours due to an appointment in Escondido.
- Juliette, a Red Cross worker, talked with two men, both of whom had lost their homes. The next thing I knew, they were praying for her as tears streamed down her face. I commended the men for praying and encouraged them to pray for other workers too. It was their pastor who lost both his home and church. They excitedly told him I encouraged them to minister to others.
- An elderly man who had lost everything, also had a heart condition. I found him a chair, sweatshirt, blanket and repeatedly checked on him as he waited in line for Red Cross

assistance. His wife was diabetic and had to wait in their van. She had not eaten for a while, so I walked up with a flashlight to check on her and gave her some food. Eventually, I was able to escort him to his vehicle where his loving wife eagerly awaited his return.

- One man told me the fire was so hot it melted a bicycle by his house. It also melted a water line that spewed water saving his house and several neighbors' houses as well! Every other house in that neighborhood was totally destroyed by the wildfires.
- Sherry, the nurse who was staffing the Red Cross station, asked me to eat with her during a break at which time I asked her if she had a religious background. She told me that she had a Catholic background but was no longer interested in Christianity. After sandwiching our conversation with non-religious talk, I shared how I also grew up in a mainline church, but that coming to know Jesus was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. God provided the perfect opportunity to share with Sherry and those around us. By asking questions and sharing my story it opened the door for the Gospel. She wrote several times to let me know how she was encouraged, and how her life was touched during our conversation. She thanked me for the additional books and audio messages I have sent to her since then. She kept in touch throughout the years until she passed away.
- As she shivered in the cold evening air, a three-year-old sat crying with red, swollen eyes from the smoke. Her mother brought her, and three other children, to seek assistance. I found warm jackets for each of them.
- A couple days later, I went back to visit the Red Cross workers and encourage them. They were excited to see me; it was like a reunion with family I had not seen for years!

Lakeside, Wednesday, November 5, 2003

Wildcat Canyon in Lakeside was another canyon area where fire and wind combined to form a wind tunnel effect. Tragically, most of the people who died were from Wildcat Canyon. Several of the survivors gave me the following report:

> About 2:00 a.m. on Sunday, they awoke to horns sounding from fleeing vehicles. Most said they had no warning as the fire quickly came upon them. With no electricity and 70 mph winds, they had to flee through darkness and smoke-filled air, making it virtually impossible to see as they drove out.

- Many people described fire tornados—fire spinning just like a tornado.
- They described tumbleweeds catching on fire; the wind throwing them ablaze a couple of hundred feet into the air. Wherever one landed, it would ignite and spread the fire.
- Approximately one-third of the people I talked to at Harbison Canyon, Crest and Lakeside had no insurance.
- Hundreds of people were coming in response to a Buddhist group distributing money to the victims. About 20 Buddhist workers were giving out $500 checks to anyone who had lost a home. Over 200 families were represented, resulting in hundreds of people standing in line under the hot sun outside Lakeside Rock and Block, a building supply company. Being the only Red Cross worker, I distributed water and food as I listened to their stories.
- Afterwards, I handed several of the Buddhist workers my book, *Faith Through the Fire*, as well as pamphlets with my testimony. I was asked to be interviewed on camera for a program to air on Taiwan national television which I was happy to do. During the ten-minute interview, I shared about ministering around the world, and then gave an overview of the ministry. They asked many more questions following the

taped interview in order to get all the facts together for their television program. They were most appreciative.

- Two Buddhist workers, Ping Yao Chang and Jennie Lee, followed me to my car, where I gave them books and copies of my testimony, and we took pictures together. Upon receiving these materials, they were so excited that they took footage of the covers to air on their program. We are confident that God touched many lives through the books and testimony on Taiwanese television.
- A professionally dressed woman was in line to receive money from the Buddhist group. I almost did not approach her because I thought she was a news reporter. Nevertheless, I felt led to talk to her. As soon as I asked what her story was, tears welled up in her eyes as she told me about losing her home in the fire. She had three children, ages seven, nine and eleven, and worked full time. Her parents lived in the fire area and she was able to get them out, but with only their medications and some Depends. Their house burned to the ground, with no insurance. Her mother had dementia but was able to function fairly well in her own home. Now, in unfamiliar surroundings, she was getting worse. With all these family members now living in her house, the daughter was overwhelmed and desperate, not knowing what to do.
- Nicole lost everything when her apartment burned to the ground along with all its contents. As she told me her story with tears flowing down her face, I offered her counsel and tried to arrange for food, clothes and financial aid. She worked at Albertson's grocery store and had a 15-year-old daughter and a 17-year-old son. Her son was so distraught he ran away four days after the fire, and she had not heard from him since. She had no insurance and was staying with friends. Her biggest fear was the uncertainty—not knowing what to do or where to go.
- A firefighter who had talked with President Bush the day before, came up and thanked me for giving my time to help

the people in his city. “No,” I responded, “you are the one to be thanked for risking your life to put out these fires.”

I Know You

- I offered a woman named Sue some water and snacks while she waited in the hot sun to get financial aid. She looked intently at me and said, “Aren’t you Tabitha’s father? I heard you speak at my church.” She told me how her and her husband lost everything in the fire. She was overjoyed to have run into me so unexpectedly, knowing I had come so far.
- A young woman named Susie was looking my way. She said, “I know you! I heard you speak, and I have all of your books and love them!” She and her husband Dave had previously attended East Valley Christian Fellowship where Tabitha and Clayton attended. She graciously shared that hearing me speak was the best thing that ever happened in their Christian walk. She lost all my books in the fire, but was ecstatic when I said I had replacement books in my car for her.
- Wayne and Susan lived in Harbison Canyon and came to the evacuation center in Lakeside. Susan moved in with Wayne because he lived on top of a mountain. Her former husband would have killed her if he could have found her, but she figured that he would not make the effort to go up that steep mountain to try to beat or shoot her. After four years, Susan and Wayne split as partners but remained best friends. Both lost their homes in the Harbison Canyon fire and were appreciative of the financial assistance and spiritual counsel I offered.
- A woman in line was near tears. She shared with me how she had been living in her car for three days with her parrot, who was all she had left. She had lost everything in the fires and was uncertain of where she should go.

- Ruth was a young woman I spoke with who had a husband and five children. They lost everything in the fire. Her 15-year-old son was recently diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease.

God Moments

- I spot a man who looks rough and approach him to offer water and food. As he tells his story, I find he was a staff sergeant in the Army and was stationed in South Korea before his retirement. He was most interested to learn that I had ministered to our military in South Korea several years ago. When asked if he was attending church, he explained that family members were encouraging him to get back with the Lord and start attending church again. I said, "Tell your family that God sent a person all the way from Pennsylvania to meet you and tell you that it's time for you to give your life back to the Lord and get back in church!" He smiled and assured me that he would do so.
- Donna and Larry lost their home in the fire and had no place to go so they were staying with Larry's brother Keith and his wife. Larry and Keith had not talked to each other in almost 10 years—primarily because they were both busy with their own lives. Larry and Keith were having a wonderful time staying up until midnight every night talking and reminiscing about the past. Donna said to me, "Out of the bad, comes the good."
- Richard lived with his daughter, her husband, their four daughters and Joe, father-in-law to Richard's daughter. Like most of these stories, they lost everything in the fires. They gave an amazing account of how they escaped, with no evacuation warning. Hearing the horns of fleeing vehicles, they looked out their window and saw a wall of fire, nearly 200 feet high, coming toward them. Joe relayed that they had only a few minutes to get out of the house and into their vehicles. He was hosing down the house when Richard

screamed at him, "Joe, you're going to die!" Joe said those words stuck in his head. The heat was so intense that his shirt nearly caught on fire and was steaming hot when he got into the vehicle.

Speeding down the mountain from Wildcat Canyon through the smoke, he passed three vehicles with people still inside who had been incinerated. Joe continued on, traveling 60 mph in their motor home. He swung around a corner to see flashing lights and two fire trucks. When he slammed on the brakes, they locked up. He began sliding, certain he would hit the fire trucks and go up in flames. Instead, one fire truck happened to be pulling forward while the other was backing up, and the motor home miraculously slid between them.

Since the fire, Richard said he had not told anyone about his experience. With tears in his eyes, but deeply thankful that he and his family were alive, he relived some of the horrible events. Joe and Richard told me about a mother and child who did not have time to get out. She had filled the tub with water and put the baby in the tub, but the heat was so intense they were consumed. Another mother, who could not get out, ran to a dried up pond area and lay in the middle of it with her body, covering her baby. The mother's hands and arms were burned, but she and the baby lived.

Richard had no insurance and all he had were the clothes on his back. No clothes at the center fit him; they were all too large. He was my size, so I gave him two of my own shirts from the car, a copy of *Faith Through the Fire* and my testimony. He was most grateful.

At the End of the Day

- At the end of the day, I went back to the Red Cross headquarters to report in. The Mental Health desk was right next to the Spiritual Care desk. In spite of the noisy room, Fred, one of the national directors of Mental Health,

overheard my report. He gave several accounts of incredible first-hand experiences over the years in dealing with people in other national disasters. He said, "There is no other explanation than that a Divine Being intervened." I replied, "Fred, maybe we need to switch you over from Mental Health to Spiritual Care." He listened intently for several more minutes as I spoke of my faith in God.

- On Friday, November 14, I decided to check in on the Lakeside center. On Wednesday, with hundreds of people there, I had been the only Red Cross worker and the only chaplain. This day, there were five Red Cross workers and only about seven people who needed help. Robin, the owner of the Alpine Rock and Block, was excited to see me and asked for more of my books and audio messages to pass out. She said that a man had come in yesterday with a copy of my book looking for me.

Crest Emergency Relief Center, Saturday, November 15, 2003

- A woman told me that out of her family's nine homes in Crest, five were totally destroyed with only two left undamaged. Her own home and those of her two daughters were destroyed.
- Eric was a 47-year-old man whose house had burned many years before when he was in junior high school. History repeated itself when fire, once again, destroyed his house, along with his vehicle restoration business and four of his rare model cars. Like so many others, he had no insurance. Upon arriving from working in Northern California, he saw the remains of his home and business for the first time. I suggested that if I were in his place, I would begin the quest to discover if there was a God, if He was trying to get my attention and what He wanted me to learn through all of

this. To get him started, I gave him my audio message *Knowing God*.

- Brian, a former drug addict, lost everything in his apartment, and he had no insurance. He had been an alcoholic but quit drinking when his seven-year-old daughter was born. His ex-wife was still a drug addict and had not seen their daughter in seven years. This fire had motivated him to re-evaluate his life, live for the Lord, quit smoking and go to a nutritionist to lose weight and regain his health.
- Another survivor—a young woman, who had divorced her husband in May—had all her daughter's possessions in a Suburban. They were staying in La Mesa and in the middle of the night, the vehicle was stolen.
- My next encounter was with two women who seemed devastated. After talking to and praying with them, I asked what insight or lesson they had gained. One of the women said, "I am getting my life right with God and spending more time with my family." I replied, "You have gained far more from your loss than you ever would have gained if the fire never occurred." They both agreed.
- I talked to dozens of others, including a well-known pastor, David Jeremiah, who was working at the same Red Cross station. Ed Lugan, a friend of my ministry, drove down from Oceanside to assist me in any way needed.

Back to Harbison Canyon

- I met a college student named Jeremy. His father had left a week before the fire for Iraq with the Navy. He lived with his mother, two younger brothers and sister in their smoke-damaged house. Jeremy had watered his house down to protect it from the fires until the heat became too intense. He had inhaled so much smoke that he was coughing up a black phlegm.

- John was a 72-year-old man from Portugal, living alone since his wife died five years previously. He thanked me 10 times for the help I provided. Because I had a badge that said, "Chaplain," he thought I was "Mr. Chaplain."
- During a lunch break, the head Red Cross worker approached and asked me to speak to a man named Patrick who was "ready to lose it." Patrick had lost his home and two vehicles, had no insurance and was being housed in a hotel 20 miles away. A bicycle someone gave him was his only mode of transportation. His mother and father were dead, and he was an only child with no family. Patrick laid tile for a living but couldn't work without a vehicle and his tools. He had not yet received any checks from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). He did not want to stay with his former girlfriend and their one-year-old daughter because of other guys staying there which would lead to fights and problems. In addition, he had a terrible toothache and only a few hours of sleep each night because of the thoughts and memories of the fire. After talking for thirty minutes and giving him some direction, I introduced him to Mark, the local pastor, who helped him with necessary resources and follow-up.
- Scott, a retired Marine from Gettysburg—about 50 years old—suffered partial loss of his house, but had a great attitude. His parents had been killed in a car accident when he was 11, and he was put in an orphanage while his younger brother and sister were adopted. His youthful anger led a judge to give him the option of going to prison or enlisting in the Marines. He said the Marines Corps provided the discipline he needed, and he was doing well. It was hard for him to say goodbye to me—and even harder when I told him I would be returning to Pennsylvania in a few days.

Serving

It was a privilege to have served with the Red Cross for those two weeks and have such amazing opportunities to help, encourage and minister as a chaplain to hundreds of people at several disaster relief centers and also on-site at their burned homes. There are still stories left to tell.

Christian organizations and churches such as Samaritan's Purse, Billy Graham Association and Horizon Christian Fellowship provided hundreds of local volunteers and equipment, as well as others from out-of-state, to assist the fire victims in every way possible. We were able to offer both humanitarian aid and hope through Jesus Christ.

I was greatly encouraged by the victims' courage, determination and attitude in the midst of such tragic loss. In spite of the heart-wrenching stories of devastation, there were many amazing accounts of divine protection and personal victories. Many testified of renewed faith, restored relationships, changed lifestyles, lessons learned and new and rearranged priorities. For many, their gains were far greater than their losses. *Out of the ashes came many people refined through the fire.*

Cross-Country

The Red Cross called my daughter's house in Alpine several times and left messages that they desperately needed me, but I was already back in Pennsylvania. Tabitha, who was four months pregnant, was having her own "crisis" in California. She called to let us know that two-year-old Carson had croup (probably from all the smoke); because of a dead battery in her van, she was unable to take three-year-old Caeleana to preschool for her special day of being "superstar"; a fellow officer had been killed on his CHP motorcycle while on duty, so Clayton had to work overtime in San Diego to cover his beat. Meanwhile, a severely autistic adolescent tried to kick in Tabitha's front door. She held it with all her strength while little Caeleana and Carson stood by her until he finally left.

Back in Pennsylvania, I visited my mother, Flo, at the Bentley House. Her Alzheimer's had progressed rapidly. She walked around looking for her mother, saying her father was coming from California. (Later, within a few months of Dr. Linda Spanos placing her on nutritional supplements, she greatly improved.)

One week later, I was back at Tabitha's for Thanksgiving, a month after the fires started. The Santa Ana winds were blowing again and blew ash everywhere. It came in every crack of Tabitha's house (fireplaces, front door, and kitchen vent). The air quality was terrible for several days.

A few days after Thanksgiving, I saw Susan in Alpine and told her, "I did not wait for you and Joe to lead us to Alpine because when I woke up early, I felt Karen and I needed to leave immediately." She replied, "The Lord must have led you to leave because a few hours after you left, we were evacuated and could not go west, but were forced east." They went to El Centro, California, but there were no hotels available, so they had to go all the way to Yuma, Arizona, where they found the last available hotel room.

In the Aftermath

Following the disastrous events of 9/11, a window opened temporarily in New York where you could talk to anybody about Jesus. Likewise, in California, this same door opened and virtually everyone I met was receptive to hearing about faith in Jesus Christ. Every day for weeks, I had flashbacks in the daytime and dreams at night of the sights I saw, faces of the people I met and the stories they told me. Because of the smoke and debris I inhaled, I spit up black phlegm for weeks; my lungs ached and I was unable to get a full breath of air in my left lung until nearly four years later.

In March 2004, less than six months after our experience in the California wildfires, Karen was diagnosed with cancer. I wonder if the trauma and stress of the fires and smoke might have contributed to it. At that time (twenty years ago), the oncologist gave her less than five years to live, yet, thank the Lord, she is still working beside me at our ministry center in Pennsylvania.

Over the years, we have heard from many people who were victimized by the fires and how the Lord has, and is, working in their lives:

- One woman is now pastoring a church.
- A couple who lost their baby served as missionaries to Africa.
- Todd miraculously recovered, has two sons and he and his wife faithfully support our ministry.
- The Lord brought many lives under His control through those out-of-control wildfires. I have crossed paths with several whose lives were eternally impacted—I know that mine was!
- Nurse Sherry wrote to us at Christmas for many years. Here is one such letter:

Hi Bill, Just want to thank you so very much for the book and newsletters from your ministry—loved seeing the pictures of you and enjoyed the memories they brought. Actually came at a perfect time as I am usually pretty "up" but had been feeling "down"—lifted my spirit greatly! I "re-listened" to the CD you had given me at the California wildfires. I felt a real bond with you from the minute we first spoke—guess God was trying to tell me something. I have been going to church pretty regularly for about two years. May God keep you safe in your travels in His work. Sherry L., San Diego, California

Where It Is "Safe"

After the wildfires in California in 2003, we encouraged our daughter Tabitha and her husband Clayton to consider moving to Pennsylvania "where it is safe" (except for tornados). They and the children would be free from the wildfires, earthquakes and mountain lions; as well as coyotes, rattlesnakes, scorpions, tarantulas and black widow spiders found occasionally in their backyard in Alpine.

Shortly thereafter, God moved in an unexpected and incredible way to do just that—move them to Pennsylvania. Then (ironically), I was bitten by a brown recluse spider—not in some far and remote

place—but in my own shed in Pennsylvania! Following that, bears and coyotes were sighted near Tabitha and Clayton's neighborhood.

So much for safe environments. It is only God's grace that protects any of us, no matter where we are or what we are doing. No matter what we face, the LORD is an awesome and faithful God!

Fire in the Scriptures

The following are some references to *fire* mentioned in Scripture (emphasis added). In light of the devastating California wildfires, and many other wildfires throughout the world, it is sensible to consider what God has to say about various types of fire. Some of these verses will be comforting while others might be disconcerting because they represent a reality none of us want to experience:

Exodus 40:38:

For throughout all their journeys, the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and there was **fire in it by night**, in the sight of all the house of Israel.

Deuteronomy 4:12:

Then the LORD spoke to you from the **midst of the fire**; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice.

Isaiah 43:2-3:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you **walk through the fire**, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God....

1 Corinthians 3:15:

If anyone's **work is burned up**, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet only so **as through fire**.

James 3:5:

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how **great a forest is set aflame by such**

a small fire!

1 Peter 1:6-7:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though **tested by fire**, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3:9-13:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the **heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat**, and the **earth and its works will be burned up**. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the **elements will melt with intense heat**! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

Revelation 1:12-15:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and **His eyes were like a flame of fire**. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to **glow in a furnace**, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.

Revelation 16:8-9:

And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was given power to it to **scorch people with fire**. And the people were **scorched with fierce heat**; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory.

Revelation 20:15:

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the **lake of fire**.

Revelation 21:8:

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the **lake that burns with fire** and brimstone, which is the second death.

Death to Life

Whether literally or figuratively, fire is a terrifying reality. Unless you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and your name is written in the Book of Life, you will one day face God's judgment. Instead of facing Him as your future Judge, you can meet Him now as your Savior.

John 5:24:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

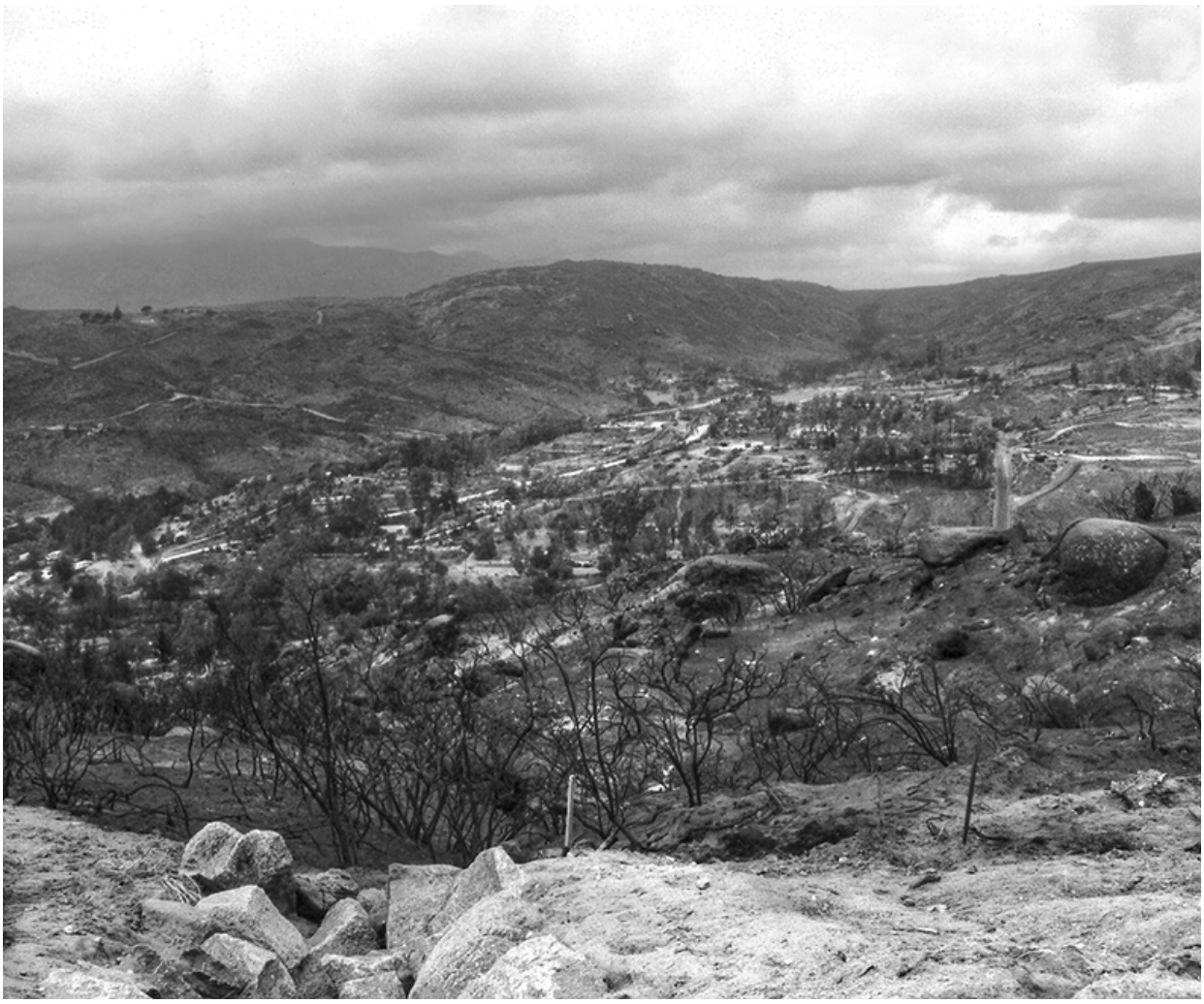
Smoking Hot!

Little did I know that twenty years after our ordeal in the California wildfires, I would experience what it means to catch on fire! Staff volunteer, Dick Hetrick, had cut down two trees on our property to make room for a new ministry construction project. A few weeks later, while burning the branches, my jacket vest, shirt and hat caught fire! Another ministry volunteer, Bruce Adams, helped pull the burning clothes over my head. After just a few days, the first- and second-degree burns were barely noticeable. What seemed like a certain tragedy resulted in another testimony of God's miraculous protection. (More details are related in my book, *The Impossible*.)

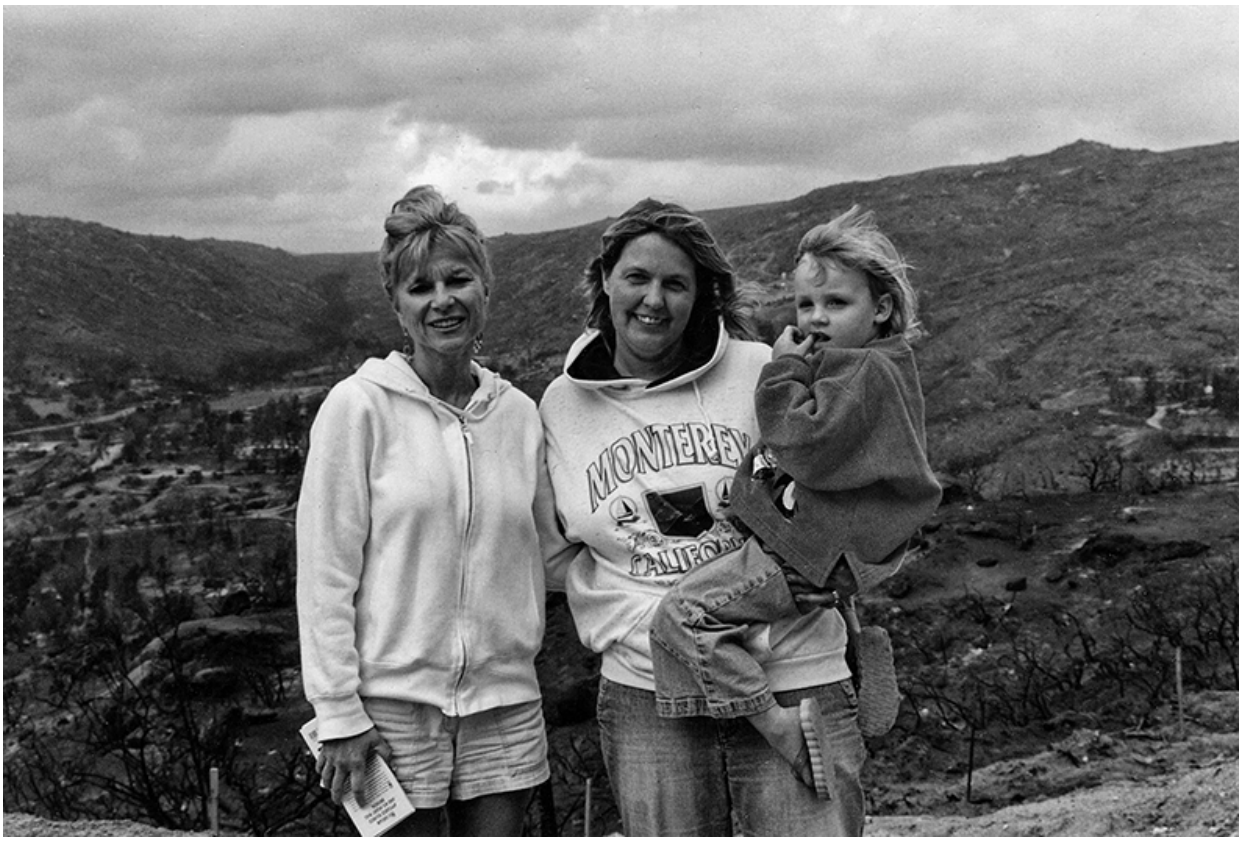
Clayton and Tabitha’s back yard as Santa Ana winds pick up.

Clayton and Tabitha’s house.

Clayton and Tabitha’s neighborhood as fire draws close.



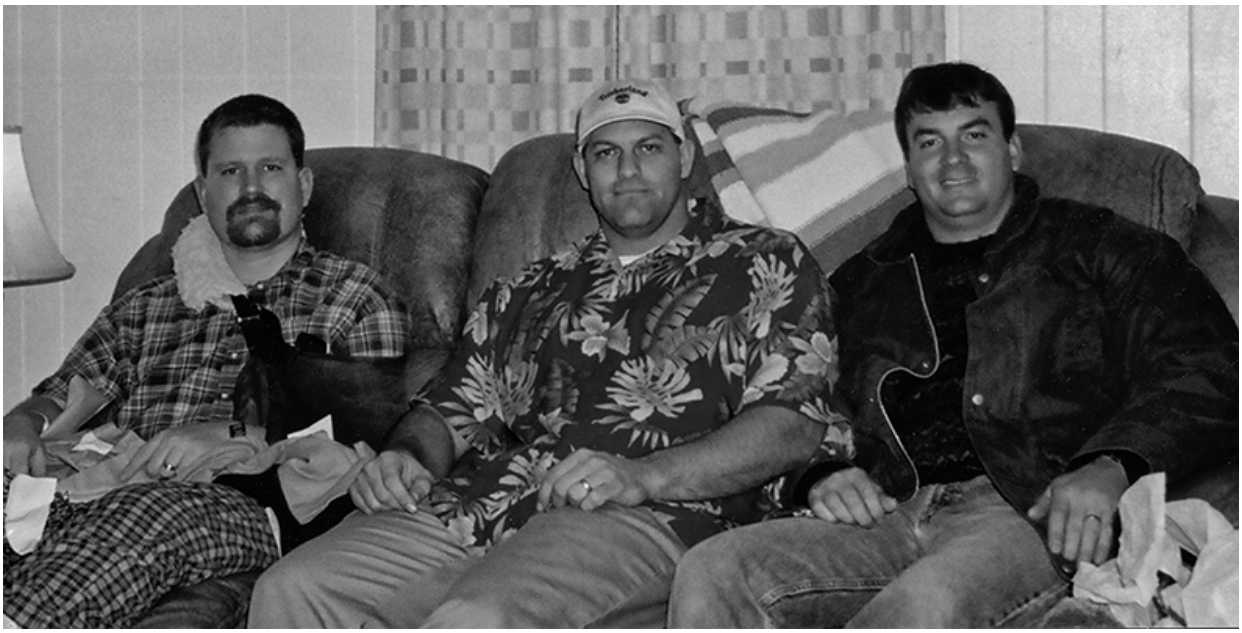
Scorched mountains near Clayton and Tabitha’s house.



Susan (whom we befriended by the road) with Karen and Caeleana.

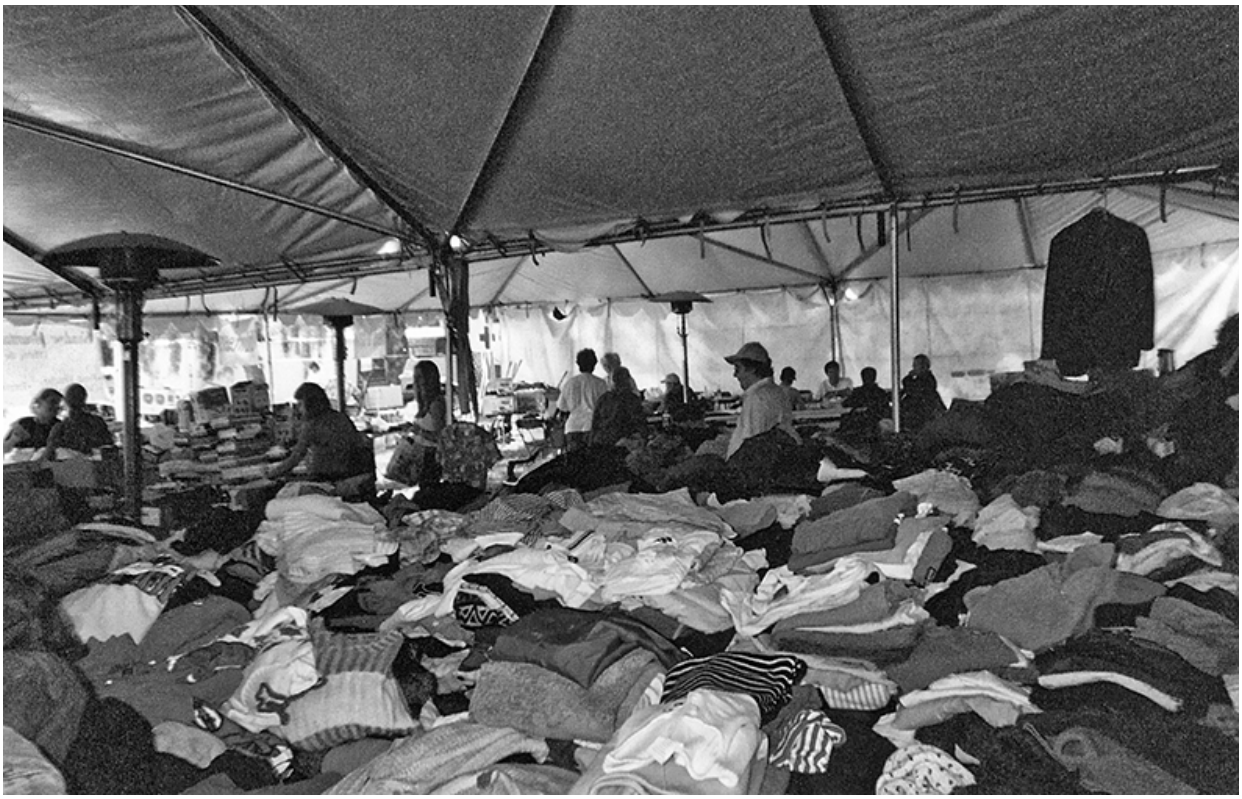
Susan’s house which survived the California wildfires.

Rich Miller and California Highway Patrol Officer Clayton Smith examine Todd's demolished vehicle.



Todd, Rich and Clayton sit on Todd’s couch following his long stay in the hospital and miraculous recovery.

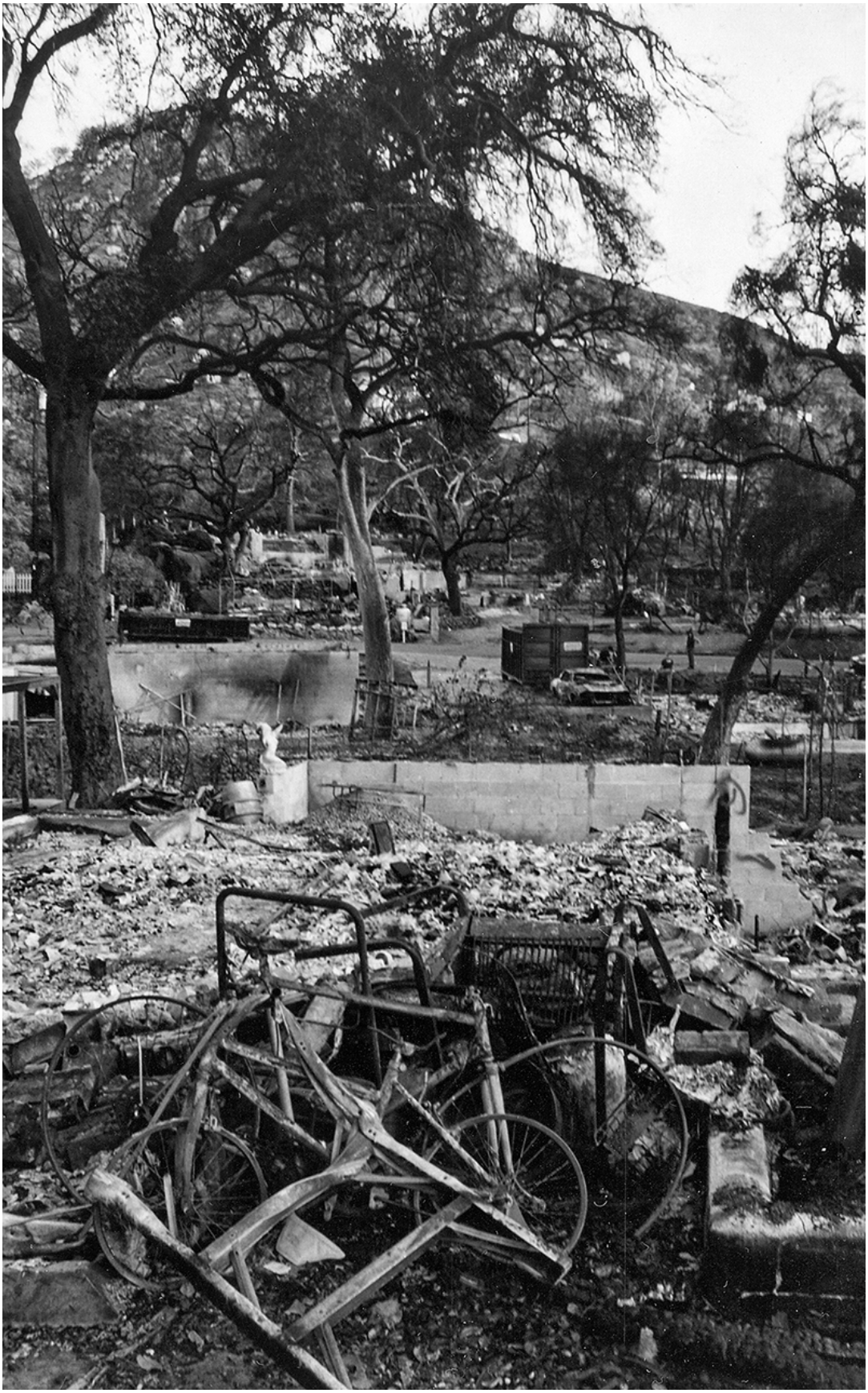
Red Cross stations set up to help the fire victims.



Red Cross stations set up to help the fire victims.

Two women from Taiwan who interviewed Bill holding *Faith Through the Fire* books in front of the yellow convertible Mustang Dirt Cheap Car Rental provided Bill free of charge.

Remains of a home that Bill visited to assist the fire victims.



Remains of some of the homes and businesses that Bill visited to assist the fire victims.

Remains of some of the homes and businesses that Bill visited to assist the fire victims.

For More Information

Bill Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

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